AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

This listing of claims replaces all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

1. (Currently Amended) At a computer system configured to manage an online chat session relating to a specified subject being discussed between a plurality of members of a group of chat participants, the group including a plurality of computer users, a computer implemented method for including a software resource as a member of the group of chat participants within the online chat session conducted through a messaging service, comprising the steps of:

(a)   registering the software resource to indicate that it is available to participate in an online chat session, when said software resource is executed;

(b)   including the software resource, along with the plurality of computer users, as members in a group of online chat participants, each member in the group of chat participants, including the software resource, capable of sending a plain language message relating to the specified subject being discussed to all the other members in the group of chat participants, including the software resource;

(c)   receiving from a member of the group of chat participants a submission of a plain language message related to the specified subject being discussed;

(d)   transmitting the plain language message to each member of the group of online chat participants, including the software resource;

(e)   the software resource parsing the plain language message to generate a query for data related to the specified subject being discussed;

(f)   the software resource submitting the generated query to at least one database to obtain data specific to the subject being discussed;

(g)   the software resource receiving a response to the query from at least one of the at least one databases;

(f) (h)   the software resource determining a plain language response to the message based on the received database response, the plain language response being related to the subject being discussed; and

(g) (i)   the software resource transmitting the plain language response back to all of the members of the group of chat participants, including the member that submitted the plain

language message and including at least one other member that did not submit the plain language message, thus enabling each member of the group of chat participants to equally interact with the software resource as another participant in the online chat session, by responding to the plain language message relating to the specified subject being discussed.

2. (Original) The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of enabling the user to selectively direct the message to the software resource.

3. (Previously Presented) The method of Claim 1, wherein one or more of the plurality of computer users answers the plain language message sent to the software resource.

4. (Original) The method of Claim 1, wherein, if the software resource is unable to determine a plain language response to the plain language message, the response is one of a nil response and an indication that a response cannot be provided.

5. (Original) The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of providing a graphic indication that the software resource is online and available to participate in the online chat session as a participant.

6. (Original) The method of Claim 1, wherein the plain language message comprises a query, and the plain language response comprises data responsive to the query.

7. (Previously Presented) The method of Claim 3, wherein the user that submitted the message receives multiple responses to the message including responses from the software resource and one or more of the plurality of computer users.

8. (Original) The method of Claim 1, wherein the step of registering comprises the step of registering with a messaging service server through which the messaging service is implemented for all participants in the online chat session, including the software resource.

9. (Original) The method of Claim 1, wherein the step of determining the plain language response includes the step of employing the software resource to search through data accessible by the software resource to find data provided in the plain language response.

10. (Previously Presented) A machine readable medium having processor-executable machine instructions for performing steps (b) - (d) as recited in Claim 1.

11. (Previously Presented) A machine readable medium having processor-executable machine instructions for performing steps (a) and (e) - (g) as recited in Claim 1.

12. (Currently Amended) A method for accessing information available through a software resource during a messaging service session <u>relating to a specified subject being discussed</u>, comprising the steps of:

(a)   indicating <u>participants</u> in a group of online chat participants in the messaging service session, the group including as members in the group a plurality of users and a software resource, at least one of the plurality of users of the messaging service session and a software resource being included as participants in the messaging service session;

(b)   enabling any of the plurality of users to enter a plain language ~~query~~ <u>message </u>in the messaging service session <u>relating to a specified subject being discussed</u>;

(c)   transmitting the plain language ~~query~~ <u>message </u>to each member of the group of online chat participants, including the software resource;

(d)   the software resource parsing the plain language ~~query~~ <u>message to generate a query for data related to the specified subject being discussed</u>;

(e)   <u>the software resource submitting the generated query to at least one database to obtain data specific to the subject being discussed</u>;

(f)   <u>the software resource receiving a response to the query from at least one of the at least one databases</u>;

~~(e)~~ <u>(g)</u> the software resource automatically determining information responsive to the ~~software ~~plain language ~~query~~ <u>message based on the received database response, the plain language response being related to the subject being discussed</u>; and

~~(f)~~ <u>(h)</u> transmitting the information responsive to the plain language ~~query~~ <u>message </u>back to all of the members of the group of chat participants, including the member that submitted the plain language message and including at least one other member that did not submit the plain language message, thus enabling each member of the group of chat participants to equally access information through the software resource, wherein the software resource acts as a participant in the messaging service session by responding to the plain language query entered by any of the plurality of users<u>, the plain language message relating to the specified subject being discussed</u>.

13. (Original) The method of Claim 12, wherein the software resource and all other participants in the messaging service session are coupled in communication over a network.

14. (Original) The method of Claim 12, further comprising the step of enabling the user to selectively add the software resource to the messaging service session from a list of prospective participants.

15. (Currently Amended) The method of Claim 12, further comprising the step of enabling the user to selectively direct the plain language ~~query~~ message to the software resource.

16. (Currently Amended) The method of Claim 12, wherein the software resource comprises a data manager program that accesses a store of data to find the information responsive to the plain language ~~query~~ message transmitted from the user.

17. (Currently Amended) The method of Claim 12, further comprising the step of transmitting an indication from the software resource to the user that information responsive to the plain language ~~query~~ message could not be provided.

18. (Original) The method of Claim 12, further comprising the step of providing an indication to a user when the software resource is unavailable to participate in a messaging service session.

19. (Original) The method of Claim 12, wherein the information provided by the software resource includes a network address at which data responsive to the query are located.

20. (Original) The method of Claim 12, wherein a plurality of software resources are included in a list of prospective participants in the messaging service session.

21. (Currently Amended) A system for enabling a software resource to respond as a conventional participant in a messaging service session implemented over a network, comprising:

(a)   a messaging service server coupled to the network and programmed for implementing registration of prospective instant message participants available to be added to a messaging service session as participants;

(b)   a user computing device coupled to the network and including a processor programmed to:

(i)   execute a messaging service session in which members of a group of online chat participants including a plurality of users are ~~participating~~ discussing a specified subject;

(ii)   add a software resource as a member of the group of online chat participants in the messaging service session to interact with other online chat participants regarding the specified subject; and

(iii)   enable any of the plurality of users to enter a plain language ~~query~~ message for information to be obtained from the software resource within the messaging service session; and

(c)   a software resource computing device coupled to the network and programmed to:

(i)   execute the software resource;

(ii)   register the software resource with the messaging service server when the software resource is available to participate in a messaging service session as a participant;

(iii)   parse a plain language ~~query~~ message received from one of the plurality of users during the messaging service session to generate a query for data related to the specified subject being discussed;

(iv)   ~~access data with the software resource to find information responsive to the plain language query~~ submit the generated query to at least one database to obtain data specific to the subject being discussed; ~~and~~

(v)   receive a response to the query from at least one of the at least one databases;

(vi)   determine a plain language response to the message based on the received database response, the plain language response being related to the subject being discussed

(v)(vii) transmit said information to all of the members of the group of chat participants, including the user computing device that submitted the plain language message and including at least one other member that did not submit the plain language message over the network, thus enabling each member of the group of chat participants to equally interact with the software resource as another participant in the online chat session, by enabling the software resource to respond to the plain language ~~query~~ message relating to the specified subject being discussed.

22. (Currently Amended) The system of Claim 21, wherein the software resource computing device includes a data store from which the information is derived to respond to the plain language ~~query~~ message received during the messaging service session.

23. (Currently Amended) The system of Claim 21, wherein the user computing device includes a user interface that enables a user to enter the plain language ~~query~~ message into the messaging service session.

24. (Original) The system of Claim 21, wherein the user computing device includes a display on which the messaging service session is viewed, an image viewable during said messaging service session including an indication of whether the software resource is available to participate in the messaging service session.

25. (Original) The system of Claim 21, wherein the user computer device is programmed to enable a user to selectively add the software resource as a participant in the messaging service session.

26. (Currently Amended) Apparatus that includes a software resource as a member of a group of chat participants within an online chat session <u>relating to a specified subject being discussed</u> conducted through a messaging service, comprising:

  (a) a network interface that connects to a network over which the messaging service session is communicated;

  (b) a display;

  (c) a user input device;

  (d) a memory in which a plurality of machine instructions are stored; and

  (e) a processor coupled to the network interface, the display, the user input device, and the memory, said processor executing the machine instructions, causing the processor to carry out a plurality of functions, including:

    (i) registering the software resource to indicate that it is available to participate in an online chat session, when said software resource is executed;

    (ii) including the software resource, along with the plurality of computer users, as members in a group of online chat participants, each member in the group of chat participants, including the software resource, capable of sending a plain language message <u>relating to the specified subject being discussed</u> to all the other members in the group of chat participants, including the software resource;

    (iii) receiving from a member of the group of chat participants a submission of a plain language message <u>related to the specified subject being discussed</u>;

    (iv) transmitting the plain language ~~query~~ <u>message</u> over the network to each member of the group of online chat participants in the online chat session including the software resource; ~~and~~

    ~~(v) all of the members of the group of chat participants, including the member that submitted the plain language message and including at least one other member that did not submit the plain language message receiving a response over the network from the software resource responding to the plain language query as a participant~~

    <u>(v) parsing the plain language message to generate a query for data related to the specified subject being discussed;</u>

    <u>(vi) the software resource submitting the generated query to at least one database to obtain data specific to the subject being discussed;</u>

(vii)   the software resource receiving a response to the query from at least one of the at least one databases;

(viii)   the software resource determining a plain language response to the message based on the received database response, the plain language response being related to the subject being discussed; and

(ix)   the software resource transmitting the plain language response back to all of the members of the group of chat participants, including the member that submitted the plain language message and including at least one other member that did not submit the plain language message, thus enabling each member of the group of chat participants to equally interact with the software resource as another participant in the online chat session, by responding to the plain language message relating to the specified subject being discussed.

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27. (Currently Amended) Apparatus that enables a software resource to interact as a participant during a messaging service session relating to a specified subject being discussed, comprising:

(a)   a network interface that connects to a network over which the messaging service session is communicated;

(b)   a memory in which a plurality of machine instructions are stored; and

(c)   a processor coupled to the network interface, and the memory, said processor executing the machine instructions, causing the processor to carry out a plurality of functions, including:

(i)   registering the software resource with a messaging service as being available to participate in a messaging service session as a member of a group of online chat participants, the group including as members of the group a plurality of users and the software resource;

(ii)   parsing a plain language ~~query~~ message relating to a specified subject being discussed received from any of the plurality of users during a messaging service session in which the software resource has been added as a participant by one or more of the plurality of users, the software resource being enabled to receive and parse the plain language ~~query~~ message;

(iii)   ~~finding data responsive to the plain language query~~ submitting the generated query to at least one database to obtain data specific to the subject being discussed; ~~and~~

(iv)   receiving a response to the query from at least one of the at least one databases;

(v)   automatically determining information responsive to the plain language message based on the received database response, the plain language response being related to the subject being discussed;

~~(iv)~~(vi) transmitting the ~~data~~ information responsive to the plain language message over the network to all of the members of the group of chat participants, including the member that submitted the plain language message and including at least one other member that did not submit the plain language message, thus enabling each member of the group of chat participants to equally access information through the software resource.